

“I Need Thee Every Hour”
Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32:1-7
Lent 1

Psalm 32:1-7

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my
groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden
to till it and keep it.

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

^{3:1}Now the serpent was craftier than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11—Keith

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Introduction

There is a timeless prayer of confession, handed down through the Church tradition, which is still used in many churches and still resonates in the hearts of many Christians. Part of that prayer is a confession before God that we have sinned against God “in thought, word, and deed, *by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.*”

Sometimes those are called sins of commission—what we have done—and sins of omission: the right that we should have done, the good that we might have done, but which to this point, we have not.

To the world outside these doors, the word “sin” doesn’t mean very much; it’s a quaint relic from what feels like a distant and irrelevant time. But for those of us who believe there is something infinitely greater than ourselves, and it is holy and good and beautiful and the truest thing that exists, sin is about our relationship to the God who is neither quaint nor a relic but is the most relevant and immediate presence in our lives.

And when we think about who God put us here to be, and what astonishing things God can accomplish through us if we are willing to submit ourselves to God’s will and follow Jesus wherever he leads—things like feeding people and making peace and fighting for justice and overcoming loneliness and healing wounds—

when we take time to seriously consider what it is that God wants with us, and the impact of our own human inclination to turn and run away from that, we can confront and even embrace the idea that there is work to be done in us yet, which means we have room to grow, and we have a loving, almighty creator God who wants to help us do that.

Which itself is a humbling and exhilarating thought: the same one who made the hundred billion stars in more than 100 billion galaxies is more interested today in remaking you and me. If only we will allow it.

Prayer

O God, we admit, we testify, and we unflinchingly confirm: we need you.

We are faced with temptations all the time.

We who know what it's like to have made some regrettable decisions—and sometimes, in spite of ourselves, keep on making them—we need you.

We whose anger at others, or whose disgust or fear toward others, not only borders on sinfulness but regularly crosses that border—we need you.

We who have lost sleep on many nights, aching to relive the times we treated others in ways that we would not be treated ourselves—we need you.

And with Psalm 32, we nod in recognition and sympathy for the one who faithfully prays:

“While I kept silence,
my body wasted away through my groaning all day long...
But then, I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my own iniquity;
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

Help us, O God, through our sleepless nights, and through the thoughts and feelings we are not proud of, and through the consequences of our most regrettable choices—even when those

consequences are only confined to the pain in our own conscience.

Merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you
with our whole heart and mind and strength;
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

In your mercy, forgive what we have been,
help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be,
that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways
to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

The Sermon

All the way back to the origin story that sets the stage for everything we understand about God's interaction with humankind, human beings have dealt with temptation.

Individually and as a species, we don't exactly have a great record in that department.

Immediately following his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness, fasting for forty days and forty nights, and he was famished, he had no food and no comfort and nowhere to hide. He had only three things to live on.

Starving for food may have tried to play tricks on his mind; but even if Jesus was *spiritually* famished at the end of these forty days and nights—which would be a meaning more typical of Matthew—he still stood for these three truths:

One: in God’s universe, in the life God has given us, we cannot sustain ourselves on lies but can only live by truth—namely, “every Word that comes from God.”

Two, we humans—mortals, blessed beyond comprehension just to be here—are not God. None of us is in any position to trifle with the Almighty or put God to any test.

And three, there is only one thing for us to worship: not money, not power, not the momentary pleasure of our addictions, not superiority (not even moral superiority), not self-glorification: not anything other than the source of all life, the One who created us. Worship God and serve only God.

It starts with God; it’s all about God; and it finds its fulfillment in God. And God is love. This is what your life is about.

Every year at this time, on the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday, I do another deep dive into the set of questions Frederick Buechner put together not only to illustrate what Lent is about, but to actually engage with it deeply.

This time, there is the precious, aching melancholy of reflecting that this is our first Lent since the passing of Fred Buechner, after almost a full century in which he made his mark on so many lives.

“In many cultures,” he wrote, “there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year’s income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year’s days.

“After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

“If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or there isn’t, which side would get your money, and why?

“When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

“If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

“Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?

“Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?

“If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?”

“To hear yourself try to answer questions like these,” said Fred Buechner, “is to begin to hear something not only of who you are, but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.”ⁱ

A litany has been circulating based on the writing of a 20th century Methodist lay leader named William Arthur Ward.

As some will observe an ancient practice of giving something up for Lent, others will undertake a discipline of doing something positive for the world, or taking a moment, each day in Lent, to ponder things that maybe we should reflect on much more than we do.

It’s an invitation to fast from judging others,
and feast on the Christ who abides in them.

To fast from emphasizing our differences,
and feast on the unity of all life.

To fast from assumptions of superiority,
and feast on honest relationship.

To fast from envy,
and feast on gratitude.

To fast from furious resentment,
and feast on calming patience.

To fast from protecting our privilege,
and feast on trusting in God.

To fast from irritable complaining,
and feast on mindful appreciation.

To fast from highlighting flaws in others,
and feast on blessing people with honest affirmations.

To fast from unrelenting pressures,
and feast on unceasing prayer.

To fast from hostility,
and feast on nonviolence.

To fast from bitterness,
and feast on forgiveness.

To fast from self-absorption,
and feast on compassion.

To fast from personal anxiety,
and feast on eternal Truth.

To fast from discouragement,
and feast on hope.

To fast from apathy,

and feast on enthusiasm.

To fast from suspicion,
and feast on truth.

To fast from gossip,
and feast on purposeful silence.

To fast from feeling overwhelmed by problems,
and feast on being undergirded by prayer.

Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. Which, as always, is when the tempter shows up.

What about you? Are you hungry? And for what? What do you need? For what are you famished?

To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something of who you are, and of what you are, and are not yet, becoming.

May this Lent bring you, and bring us all, to a deeper and more joyful Easter. Amen.

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February 26, 2023

ⁱBuechner, Frederick. *Whistling in the Dark*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993; pp. 82-83.